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The distribution
of ungulates
in the Orange Free State

This paper is based on information obtained as a result of enquiries published with the assistance of the Regional Manager and District Correspondents of the South African Broadcasting Corporation in the Orange Free State. Their help is gratefully acknowledged.

In making these enquiries, care was taken to distinguish between natural populations of ungulates and animals re-introduced by the farming community. No population was classified as "natural" unless the family giving the information had lived on the farm in question for at least three generations, and could thus testify that it did not stem from recent introductions. Using this fairly strict criterion, I was surprised to find how much is still left in the Orange Free State at the present time, despite short-sighted farming practices and widespread poaching by all races.

NATURAL POPULATIONS

Steenbok

This small buck is fairly generally distributed throughout the Province, but occurs in greatest numbers (i.e. averaging 20 or more per farm per district) along rivers and in the mountainous country of the Eastern Free State (Fouriesburg, Tweeling, Petrus Steyn, Boshoff, Theunissen, Brandfort, Hoopstad, Koffiefontein).

Duiker

This species occurs naturally in the central and western Free State in numbers which average 25 per farm (Kestell, Brandfort, Theunissen, Boshoff, Koffiefontein, Smithfield, Bethulie).

Vaal Ribbok — Rooi Ribbok

These animals are recorded from Fouriesburg, Tweeling, Harrismith, Theunissen, Koffiefontein, Bethulie, Ficksburg, Smithfield and Zastron.

A remarkable assertion made by 60 per cent of the farmers concerned is that, where both species occur together, the Rooi Ribbok is diminishing in numbers, despite protection. The reason given for this is that Vaal Ribbok males are prone to attack herds of the Rooi

Ribbok and even to kill individuals. I myself witnessed a fight between males of the two species and saw the vanquished Rooi Ribbok badly wounded and put to flight by the Vaal Ribbok.

Klipspringer

This species is now very rare. A few are seen regularly in the Fouriesburg, Zastron and Kestell districts.

Blesbok

These animals are found throughout the Free State, the largest concentrations occurring in the northern and north-eastern parts of the Province. Some of the surviving herds number 50 animals or more, and a conservative estimate puts the total population of the Province at about 12,000.

Springbok

Large herds of 200 or more are found in the western, south-western and central Free State, and the total population in the Province must be well in excess of 10,000.

Black Wildebeest

Only a few natural herds are left, and from these animals are sold to farmers for restocking. Unfortunately, however, during the last two years, animals have also been sold to dealers who exported them, and thus these animals were lost to our country. Amongst those that remain, herds of over 50 occur in the Odendaalsrus, Kroonstad, Harrismith and Dewetsdorp districts, and two smaller herds exist in the Bloemfontein and Hoopstad districts.

GAME RESERVES

In general, the ungulates occurring in Free State game reserves are not natural populations. Much good work has been done in the restocking of these reserves with many different species. Unfortunately, however, enthusiasm for restocking has sometimes been carried too far, even to the point of introducing animals which are foreign to the country, as at the Franklin Game Reserve in Bloemfontein, where Fallow Deer have been introduced and plans were made to bring in Barbary Sheep as well.

The most important of the Free State reserves is undoubtedly the Willem Pretorius Reserve near Allemanskraal. Here there are herds of Red Hartebeest, Eland and Black Wildebeest, which may become important sources of animals for restocking farms. In the Franklin Game Reserve only a herd of Eland is likely to acquire similar importance and that only if measures are taken against inbreeding.

INTRODUCTION AND RE-INTRODUCTION OF ANIMALS ON PRIVATE FARMS

Reviewing activities in this direction, especially during the last ten years, we may be grateful for what has been achieved by private farmers in restocking their land with Springbok, Blesbok, Eland, Black Wildebeest and different types of small buck. All of these are now found in several districts where natural populations have disappeared. At the same time, restocking has again often been carried to unwise extremes and farmers eager to encourage

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large game animals have introduced species unsuited to the area, and even totally foreign types, such as Fallow Deer, Dromedary, Water Buffalo, Nylgai, Barbary Sheep, Hog Deer and Llamas.

Amongst indigenous forms which have been re-introduced into denuded areas are the Steenbok, Duiker, Klipspringer, Springbok, Blesbok, Black Wildebeest, and Vaal and Rooi Ribbok. Other introductions of which there are no natural populations include Blue Wildebeest, Red Hartebeest, Eland, Impala, Gemsbok, Lechwe, Reedbuck, Bushbuck and Giraffe.

This somewhat haphazard restocking programme has had some disastrous results. In some instances, there was an undesirable mixing of species with resultant crossbreeding, as in the case of the Black and Blue Wildebeest on farms in the Harrismith district. Crossbred animals may now be seen in the Johannesburg Zoo. More distressing was the mortality which sometimes occurred. Of the Gemsbok introduced by farmers, nearly 90 per cent died, and the remainder are not doing at all well. In areas with sufficient bush Impala fared satisfactorily, but amongst Lechwe, Reedbuck and Giraffe the casualties were very high, amounting on many farms to 100 per cent of the animals introduced.

To my mind, the blame for this situation must not rest entirely with the farmer, who is trying to encourage and conserve game animals, but with the fact that there is no Nature Conservation Department to advise them of the suitability or otherwise of the animals they propose to introduce. However, the outlook for the future is still a good one, and we may well be encouraged to find that there are so many farmers who wish to restock their land, not for the purpose of shooting, but for the love of seeing these animals on their farms.